**Be the “Hero” of Your Own Journey**

**The Journey**

A young prince named Guatama Sakyamuni slips through the guarded gate of his family palace on horseback. He cuts his hair, spends several years roaming as a beggar, then sits beneath a tree where he reaches the plane of enlightenment; a gift he then brings to the people of the world.

After three months wandering the Sinai wilderness with 3500 orphaned Israelites, Moses is called by God to climb a great mountain near his camp. He braves trembling earth and lightening before receiving two stone tablets, which he is told to share with his people. He returns to camp and brings with him a code to live by; a guide to righteous survival.

Luke Skywalker returns to his Aunt and Uncle's humble hut on Tatooine to find it burnt to the ground. Then, with the help of a few friends, he learns to harness the all-powerful “force” and uses it to defeat his enemies, thereby restoring the balance of light and dark in the galaxy.

A young princess falls in love with a boy named Theseus, who is unfortunately doomed to serve as the main course for an evil man-bull hybrid called the minotaur. The beast lives in an inescapable labyrinth, but the princess gives the boy a thread before he enters and, upon slaying the beast, Theseus is able to escape and receive his hero’s welcome.

Clearly each of these stories will present with a unique context to each and every reader on earth. Still, there is an undeniable similarity between them that, if understood, can help shape—and even increase—the emotional impact of your personal memoir or autobiography. That similarity, it can be argued, spans the very breadth of human history. Every myth and legend, every sit-com and Super Bowl ad, every religious text; indeed, every narrative ever written can be defined by this commonality, which exists in the basic architecture of the story.

**The Hero**

Perhaps the greatest comparative mythologist in history, Joseph Campbell traveled the globe collecting and analyzing stories. He read folklore and myths from the ancient Greeks and Romans, heard the tales of shamans, witchdoctors, and elders from isolated tribes, and scoured the religious and historical texts of just about every civilization known to exist throughout recorded history.
And, though Campbell admits that racial and cultural differences might affect the dynamic of these stories in some small way, he saw more similarities between the stories of various cultures than he saw differences. In his 1949 book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell explains how he began to see that almost every story he had ever seen or heard in his life was unified by a single structure.

He called it the “Hero’s Journey,” and he broke it down into three basic parts—*separation*, *initiation*, and *return*. The idea is this: the hero(ine) begins in a state of normalcy which is disrupted in some way (separation). Perhaps they begin to question the order of society, as in the young adult novels *The Giver* and *The Hunger Games*. Or, like Snow White and Cinderella, they are thrust out of their royal existence by an evil stepparent. Or maybe there is simply a spiritual stirring inside them; one which requires them to wander, as in the case of the Buddha.

Whatever the reason, with normalcy disrupted, thus begins the period of trials (initiation). Spiritual or physical, these trials are obstacles that the hero must face in order to gain the knowledge or elixir that had been missing or taken from them before their “call to action”. Maybe it’s a mental illness, the harshness of nature or the business world, or even a physical monster such as a dragon or a minotaur (though Campbell would likely have argued that even those monsters are but metaphors for the “dragons” in our own subconscious). The monster slain and the trial conquered, the hero can then return to their community stronger and with something to share, even if that something is simply the story of their adventure, itself.

**Being Your Own Hero**

If you find yourself at an impasse while writing or editing your own story, it might behoove you to check how it measures up against the structure of the “Hero’s Journey.” Campbell breaks down each of the three parts of the framework into subsections that essentially cover every deviation and variation possible in the narrative—from “magical helpers” in the form of fairy godmothers, doctors, or anyone with advice that helps you find your course, to “the freedom to live,” which can only be realized once all of your “dragons” lay dead—and many very successful storytellers have used the framework to their advantage while shaping their own narratives.

George Lucas, for instance, was said to have used Campbell as a direct reference while writing the story for *Star Wars*, and a memo on the “Hero’s Journey” by Christopher Vogler that circulated through the Disney ranks in the mid-1980s landed him a position working on the story for *The Lion King*.

Throughout time, the stories that have captivated us are the ones that offer this common format. Hero sets out, hero struggles, hero returns. But most important in that return is the offering, be it physical, spiritual, or metaphorical. Ultimately, the journey is not the story of the hero, but rather that of what the hero brings back with him or her to share with the rest of humanity. As you weave together the details of your own life in hopes of crafting a story with universal appeal, start by asking yourself, “Who’s the hero of this story?” Then set out to prove it.